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SUBJECT: Jordanian Youth Respond Enthusiastically to Youth Outreach

1. Summary. Over the last month, the Mission mounted a number of initiatives aimed at broadening our outreach to Jordanian youth. Among this population, animosity and distrust of the U.S. run high in the wake of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and the overwhelmingly negative coverage in the local and regional media of U.S. engagement in Iraq. However, university and high school students from a wide array of social and regional backgrounds proved very responsive to contact with both official and private Americans. Though they never failed to express their opposition to U.S. policy in the region, the students were eager to have more exchanges with Americans, both to express their own views and to learn more about American society and culture -preferably first-hand. Following are some of our encounters with youth over the last month. End Summary.

2. Responding to a demand from about 40 student grantees who visited the U.S. under the Young Leaders and the Young Ambassadors' programs last year, the PAO held a gathering at his house on March 2 which included the Ambassador and six American Fulbright students plus Embassy officers from the political and economic sections. The student leaders gave presentations on their experiences in each others' countries, particularly the misperceptions they were able to clear up, both among the young people they met and in their own minds. One female student from Jordan University's Science Department gave a power-point demonstration featuring digital photos of her visits to U.S. campuses. Iraq, the Palestinian issue, and cultural differences between Islamic society and the West were all the subject of frank, sometimes heated discussion. But by the end of the evening, the students had exchanged e-mail addresses, and we have heard from an American Fulbrighter that they have formed a chat group.

3. The next week, the PAO and Information officer spoke in Arabic to students and faculty of the journalism and political science departments of Yarmouk University in Irbid, Jordan's second largest city. Again, there was an enthusiastic response from the young academics, who underlined the importance of dialogue during this period of strong differences over policy. Students and faculty wanted to know more about the Greater Middle East Initiative. Was it a ploy to extract more concessions from Arab regimes, or a real chance to cooperate with Americans interested in strengthening democratic trends in the region? Subsequently, faculty members have asked for more public affairs programming, including a request to support a local group of citizens from the surrounding region who want to learn more about grass roots organization and the role of NGOs.

4. Post encountered a similar desire to engage during some recent youth-oriented cultural and economic public affairs programs. In late February about 60 students from five different high schools attended a digital videoconference at the Embassy and showered a historian of African-American music with questions about the social and ethnic origins of hip-hop, a popular genre among local youth. A week later a similar group of high school students crowded the auditorium to engage in a lecture-discussion of slavery and the civil rights movement, delivered by an American Fulbright scholar. And young dancers and journalists asked questions about the globalization and culture during a digital videoconference with the Battery Dance Company of New York, in advance of their performances here March 23-27. On March 17, we will also hold a seminar on USAID-backed micro finance for an audience of students from local Economics and Commerce faculties.

5. What we found in the course of these encounters with Jordanian young people, most of whom came from non-affluent, middle class backgrounds with little direct exposure to Americans, was a strong desire to make up their own minds about U.S. society and culture. Equally strong was the demand for an opportunity to convey their own views to American audiences, and to correct what they believe is a distorted picture of Arabs and Islam. Jordanian youth who participated in the summer arts exchanges, the high school

youth exchanges and similar visits to the U.S. praised the interactive parts of their programs where they got to inform American youth about their culture and society. Through P4L and MEPI programs, we hope to sustain this dialogue and encourage direct and self- sustaining contact through youth-oriented programs such as GLOBE and IEARN, which build enduring links via Internet. #GNEHM